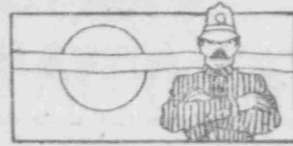


BELOW THE DEAD LINE

BY SCOTT CAMPBELL



II--The Case of Dickson's Diamonds

"N O, Jimmie, the burglar of today is not the burglar of a generation or two ago," said Felix Boyd, through a wreath of pipe smoke. "He is not the burly midnight ruffian at mere fancy of whom we shuddered in our trundle beds, the bearded fellow in rough attire and sinister mask, with a kit of tools under his coat and a brace of Smith & Wesson's in his hip pockets, whose chief attribute was brute force, and who cracked with equal complacency a merchant's safe or the merchant's skull."

Jimmie Coleman laughed, knocking the ash from his cigar, and nodded approvingly.

"This central office man was Boyd's very intimate friend and most ardent admirer, probably the latter because he knew much more of Boyd's remarkable talents than any other man, so was best able to appreciate his extraordinary abilities."

He had dropped into Boyd's office in Pine street half an hour before, merely to enjoy a morning smoke in genial company.

"You are right, Felix," said he. "Things have changed mightily in that respect since we wore a frock and knickerbockers."

"Instead, Jimmie," added Boyd, in a ruminating mood, "we have today the much more intelligent and dangerous scamp, who forms and executes his designs with exquisite cunning and sagacity, and who employs every modern mechanical device with which to overcome the constantly improving safeguards he encounters. The transition has been gradual, but is very pronounced, and the detective art has undergone a corresponding change."

"That is true, too, Felix," said he. "The successful sleuth of today, Jimmie, besides possessing the dogged persistency and brute courage of old, must be a man of broad intelligence, a keen observer and subtle analyst, and one capable of discerning remote relations. The detection of obscure bits of evidence, and the art of making correct deductions therefrom, chiefly serve to solve the great criminal mysteries of the present day."

"Time and again, Felix, you have demonstrated that," nodded Coleman. "Witness that bond robbery of Curry, Galt & Fiske last November. By the way, I see that that man Wykoff, whom you suspected of having had a hand in that affair, is again operating on the curb."

Boyd smiled oddly and laid away his pipe.

"Wykoff, as I remarked at that time, was not the master knave in that affair," said he. "It is my impression, Jimmie, there was another Richmond somewhere in the field. That ingenious robbery was not designed by Paul Wykoff, but by some much more capable and far-reaching knave."

"Do you still think so?"

"I do, indeed," said Boyd, with noticeable gravity. "It is my impression, Jimmie, that something seriously wrong exists down here below the 'Dead Line.'"

"Why do you think so?"

"Don't ask me why; the grounds for my misgivings are still vague and indefinite. Yet I seriously believe that, somewhere in this wealthy locality, where millions change hands with each passing business hour, somewhere in the very heart of our great financial metropolis, there exists a veritable genius for crime."

"A genius for crime?" echoed Coleman.

out having lighted it, and again waved his visitor to a chair.

"You do not know me by name, I take it," said Dickson, as he sat down. "Only since seeing your card," said Boyd. "I observe, however, that you are a married man, and very near-sighted."

"Dear me! How is that? Do I wear my heart on my sleeve?"

"Hardly that," smiled Boyd. "But a spot has been sponged from your vest this morning, presumably by your wife, since you scarce could have visited your tailor thus early; and I notice the handle of a reading glass protruding slightly from your inside pocket."

That one of these deductions did not affect Dickson very pleasantly was apparent in his increased nervousness, and the sudden trembling of his hands on his knees; yet he laughed a little and cried:

"Oh, yes, quite right; you are quite right, Mr. Boyd. I am very near-sighted, very, when viewing objects close at hand. Yet I do not even require glasses for observing things at a distance."

"That is occasionally the case, I understand."

"I am told so. Yet I believe that very few are as sorely afflicted as I. I can read only with a very powerful glass, as you may see."

And he now displayed his reading glass, a thick lens nearly six inches in diameter, having a silver rim and an ebony handle. Boyd merely glanced at it, then turned to Coleman, who had risen.

"Drop in a little later, Jimmie," said he. "I imagine that Mr. Dickson will not engage me."

"No, Mr. Boyd, not very long," said Dickson, when they were alone. "I received in my mail this morning a letter which gives me great uneasiness, if not serious alarm. I took it to my banker's for advice, scarce knowing what else to do, and they advised me to consult you. I wish you would examine the letter; here it is, and tell me what you think of it, and how seriously I should regard it. I am tempted to place it in the hands of the police for investigation."

Boyd examined the letter with interest, and was immediately struck with its peculiarities.

It neither was written nor printed in the ordinary way. Instead, each word had been cut singly from some book or newspaper, evidently with a penknife, and then pasted on a blank sheet of paper.

Plainly the work had been very carefully done, yet it had been found so delicate that the completed lines presented considerable irregularity, with the separate words differently spaced and slanted at various angles. The communication thus conveyed was quite brief and read as follows:

"Nathan Dixon, Maiden Lane; You look out for yourself. Persons I dare not name are about to execute a design against you, the character of which I cannot safely disclose. I am a friend to you, and this is a warning you will not wisely ignore. Heed it. Guard yourself and that most dear to you."

Boyd twice read this curious missive, then looked up at the grave face of his waiting visitor.

"Have you the cover in which this was mailed?" he asked.

"Yes, here it is," bowed Dickson, tendering the envelope.

"And dropped in one of the street boxes late yesterday afternoon. Evidently the sender designed this method to prevent being traced by his handwriting."

"That is apparent," cried Dickson, nervously. "But what of the letter itself? It has given me a dreadful shock. My nerves are completely unstrung. It is so indefinite, yet in a way so threatening. I don't know whether my life is in danger, or my property, or what. I am all of a tremble from head to foot."

"Which really is very foolish of you," said Boyd, indifferently. "I do not think your life is in any danger, Mr. Dickson. Are you a man of much property?"



telligently do so without imperiling himself. The greater your danger, sir, the greater opportunity of such a step on the part of a friend, who surely would have left you in no such uncertainty as this concerning his meaning."

"I had not thought of it in that light," cried Dickson. "Really, Mr. Boyd, I begin to think you are right."

"To go a step farther," added Boyd; "if knaves contemplate any secret design upon you, certainly no such warning as this would have preceded the execution of their project. Such a step on their part would be absurd."

"Surely."

"That, Mr. Dickson, is my opinion of this piece of indefinite patchwork."

"You believe it to be a practical joke?"

"Nothing more serious, sir."

"What would advise me to do about it?"

"Nothing at all," declared Boyd, promptly. "I should give it no further attention. I am convinced that no friend sent it to you; and such a communication from an enemy surely would be unworthy one's serious consideration. If I were you, Mr. Dickson, I should toss the letter into my waste basket, and not give it another thought."

A noteworthy change had come over the dealer in diamonds. His eyes were brighter, his cheeks flushed with satisfaction, and a smile had dispelled the manifest apprehensions with which he had entered Boyd's office.

He now shook the latter warmly by the hand, affectionately strove his thanks, and declaring that his own opinion of the mysterious letter was entirely changed, and that he now should completely disregard it.

ing on the reverse side of the page from which the word in the letter was carefully cut."

"So I can, for a fact."

"Under the word 'design,' in the letter, you find the word 'descent,' in small italics."

"Yes; it is quite plain."

"Under the word 'execute,' in the letter, you find the words 'to exert.' Plainly, Jimmie, those two words, as well as the italics noted, formed parts of the definitions of the two words 'descent' and 'exertion' on the reverse page from which the words 'design' and 'execute' were cut by the sender of this letter."

"Eureka!" cried Coleman. "It's dead open-and-shut, Felix; that the words of this letter were cut from an ordinary dictionary."

"Certainly it is, Jimmie," laughed Boyd; then he added, rather dryly: "Very possibly, Jimmie, I some day shall discover the dictionary from which they were cut."

Yet Mr. Felix Boyd gave the matter very little immediate attention. That afternoon he returned the letter to Dickson at his store in Maiden Lane, stating that he found nothing in it to warrant serious apprehensions, and he left the dealer in diamonds quite assured that his earlier fears were entirely groundless.

Boyd next called upon Dickson's bankers, who stated that the latter was a man of sterling integrity, whose word was as good as his bond, and that his family comprised a wife and seven charming children.

So Boyd let the matter drop, to take its own course, whether up or down, and ten days passed before the crash came. Then, as he was about going out to lunch one day, a policeman came rushing into his Pine street office, crying excitedly:

"Ah, you're here! Good enough!" he exclaimed. "Recalling that letter, I hastened to send for you. I'm told there has been an explosion in here, a devil of a noise, and that Dickson has gone to his summer home for the day. I happened along just after the explosion was heard, and found Gibson, who occupies the upper floors, trying to get in here."

Boyd glanced at a tall, elderly man, who nodded in corroboration of Coleman's explanation. Boyd quickly asked:

"Did Dickson tell you he should be absent today, Mr. Gibson?"

"He did, sir, as he was closing up last night. He said he was going to his summer place today, to plan for occupying it a little later."

"Does he employ no clerks here, who could have kept the store open?"

"None, sir. He runs his business alone. I greatly fear that a robbery has been committed here. The explosion occurred about ten minutes ago, and was very severe, fairly shaking the upper floors."

Boyd glanced quickly at the window. An inner curtain, drawn below the tops of the window shutters outside, prevented a view of the interior of the store.

"Have you looked out back, Jimmie?" he demanded, quickly.

"Yes, first thing," cried Coleman. "The way is through that alley, and the back window is closed with an iron shutter on hinges, secured inside the shop. There is a round hole in it through which I looked, but the smoke in the store obscured everything. There have been an explosion in there all right, but I saw no signs of thieves in the rear area, which lies a bit lower than the street. I tried to force a small cellar door back there, but it wouldn't give a hair, so I returned to tackle this one. Ah, now we're in!"

entirely exposed and easy of access. That they had been robbed of the most of their valuable contents was at once apparent.

Furthermore, indicating the violence of the explosion, the counter was thrown away, and the glass of the rear window was scattered in fragments over the floor, leaving only the secured iron shutter, through the round aperture in which entered a beam of sunlight from the rear area or yard.

On the broad sill of this window lay a large reading glass, similar to that which Dickson carried on his person; but of Dickson himself, or of the knaves guilty of perpetrating this midnight burglary, there was not a sign.

"Whew!" whistled Coleman, the instant his gaze fell upon the scene. "Here's a mess! A burglary in broad daylight!"

"Burglary, indeed!" exclaimed Boyd. "The crooks have made a clean sweep. This will settle me in Dickson's opinion. That patchwork letter of his and 'I should say wicked!' cried Coleman, hurriedly opening the rear shutter, and springing out of the window. 'I'll see what I can find out here, Felix.'"

"Go ahead!" cried Boyd. "I'll examine things in here."

Coleman returned in about five minutes, bearing in his hand a pair of soiled rubbers, with which he scrambled back through the window, remarking, rapidly:

"There are footprints in the soil of the alley, but not at all definite. Yet the crooks must have escaped by that way, and one of them probably wore these rubbers, for I found them under some refuse near the alley exit."

"Very likely," said Boyd, glancing at them. "Burglars frequently wear them to muffle their steps indoors. Size eight, aren't they?"

A flight of stairs from one corner led to a dimly lighted cellar, to which Boyd quickly conducted his companion. At the foot of the stairs he halted, and pointed to a narrow door, the one Coleman vainly tried to force from outside. Against it was a heavy piece of joist, one end of which was securely blocked several yards from the door.

"Humph!" ejaculated Coleman. "They went that way, and the timber shows how they secured the door after them. It was so adjusted as to fall into place when the door closed, thus preventing the immediate entrance of anyone anxious to learn the cause of the explosion. The delay gave the crooks a chance to get well away. They have done the job all right, covering their tracks well, and ready have a long lead on the police. There's no question about that."

Boyd nodded indifferently, and led the way upstairs.

"You had better rush a message up to Dickson's wife, Jimmie," said he. "Here is his city address. Have her, or some of his family, telegraph to Dickson and bring him here as quickly as possible. He should show up by the middle of the afternoon."

"I'll do so at once," nodded Coleman, hastening to the front door, where he only started a messenger for Dickson's residence, but also dispatched another to headquarters to report the extraordinary burglary.

When he returned he found Felix Boyd on his knees a few feet from the ruined safe, and between him and the rear window. He was intently engaged in studying, with the help of Dickson's large reading glass, the hard pine boards of the bare floor.

"What have you discovered there?" Coleman demanded, with immediate interest.

"Nothing much," muttered Boyd, glancing up.

"Only this smutty mark across the floor, Jimmie. It begins here and ends at the corner of the safe."

"What do you make of it? What caused it?"

"It was caused by a fine fuse. Jimmie, with which the charge in the safe was exploded. In burning this almost imperceptible dark line. At first sight I thought it was a narrow crack only, but this lens belonging to Dickson reveals its true character. Very kind of Dickson to have left a glass so handy."

There was in Boyd's voice an intonation so vaguely odd that it brought a look of perplexity to Coleman's attentive face. He could discern no more, however, and he growled, a little impatiently:

"Well, what of it? What do you mean by that? We know the charge was exploded by some means, and what matters whether a fuse or an electric current was used?"

"It doesn't matter much, Jimmie," returned Boyd, still on his knees. "Yet I thought I would call your attention to the line. Here at this end of it is another feature, too, hardly discernible except with the glass."

"What's that?" inquired Coleman, stooping lower.

"Here are two curved lines, parallel and scarce a quarter-inch apart," said Boyd, with his finger on the spot from which the fuse apparently had started. "They are very faint, almost like partially obliterated pencil marks. Can you see them, Jimmie? Here, take the glass."

"Yes, I can see them now," muttered Coleman, peering through the powerful lens. "But what of them?"

"Nothing of much consequence, I guess," Boyd slowly answered. "They appear to be faint scratches, like the other. It's odd, though, that both were caused by the flame of the match with which this end of the fuse was lighted. As you say, Jimmie, it doesn't matter much how it was done."

A glance about the place quickly told what had happened. The heavy door of the safe lay on the floor, and a part of the side nearest the rear window was badly shattered, leaving the interior compartments of the safe almost

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